North Africa

REMCO ENSEL

Resurgent Voices
Profanation of the Shurafa in Modern Morocco

Ever since the early stages of Islamic conversion, the Shurafa have been successful in sanctifiying their individual personae and collective presence in Moroccan society. Countervoices that questioned the legitimacy of their religious stature have, however, never been fully silenced. In recent times, state formation and the concurring processes of the spread of public education and electronic media have given a new impetus to these resurgent voices. Anthropological research shows how, for some of these modern religious contestants, protest against Sharifi authority is part of a profound emancipatory struggle.

Contesting Sharifi descent as the basis of social distinctions and marker of identity has a long history in Morocco. Jacques Berque even once suggested complementing Lévi-Provençal's *Les historiens des Chorfa* (Paris; 1922) with a repertory on *Les opposants des Chorfa*.[1] In the modern era, fundamental criticism of the saint's cult and descent-based social distinctions was particularly articulated in connection with the growth of the Salafi reform movement. Originating in 19th-century Egypt, this movement aimed to return to the original prescriptions of the faith. Adherents opted for a scripturalist Islam, in a later phase objecting to hereditary sainthood and the notion of Sharifi descent. The influence of this modernist movement in Morocco at the governmental level can be seen from a law, proclaimed as early as 1949, that made it obligatory to hand over a notarial act when claiming to be a Sharifi, in particular ᶜAlawī, surname and honorific. It remains to be said that an ambivalent attitude characterized even the severest critics. Thus, both the cult of saints and 'Sharifianism' were never repudiated by all Salafi adherents. Some took great pride in their own Sharifi descent.[2] Moreover, sociopolitical criticism of the state was often translated into a dispute between Sharifi lineages, i.e., Idrissī criticism of the ᶜAlawī state. After independence, Sharifi descent remained a major point of discussion at the state level. Sharifi privileges were severely restricted when King Hassan II successfully blocked possible dynastic ambitions of alternative Sharifi collectivities. More importantly, state policy increasingly put pressure on the privileged status of the Shurafa through monopolization of education, arbitration and religious authorization. The state thus deprived local specialists of their functions and appropriated religion as the ultimate source of legitimation.

Central in the religious debate on the meaning of Sharifi descent has been the incongruity between the fundamental equality of members of the Islamic community, as formulated in the Quranic verse 49:13, and the privileged position of the descendants of the Prophet, as read from verse 33:33.[3] One crucial point of dispute was whether only contemporary members of the Prophet's family were entitled to public respect or also his descendants. When applied to social reform, the question was whether social equality is an ideal to pursue on earth or rather something attainable only in the afterlife.[4] Induced by the spread of education and electronic media as well as by urban migration, elements of these scriptural discussions are instilled at the local level.

Descent-based distinctions in debate

In the stringent social hierarchy of the oasis societies in southern Morocco, the Haratin population occupies the lowest level of the social ladder. Haratin are people of humble descent who have specialized in agriculture and handicrafts. One form of everyday resistance that some Haratin pursued against their humble status was to protest against the practice of taking descent as foremost criterion of one's personal identity. With respect to the Shurafa they raised particular objections to the use of honorifics. Thus when French presence enabled them to migrate to Casablanca, these Haratin, who 'had been taught to say *sidi* and *lalla*' to the local Shurafa back home, were no longer prepared to do so when on leave from their urban jobs. These youngsters, as was noted in a report in 1955, 'scandalize the elders who have maintained their servile mentality and who refuse to follow them on their revolutionary path.'[5]

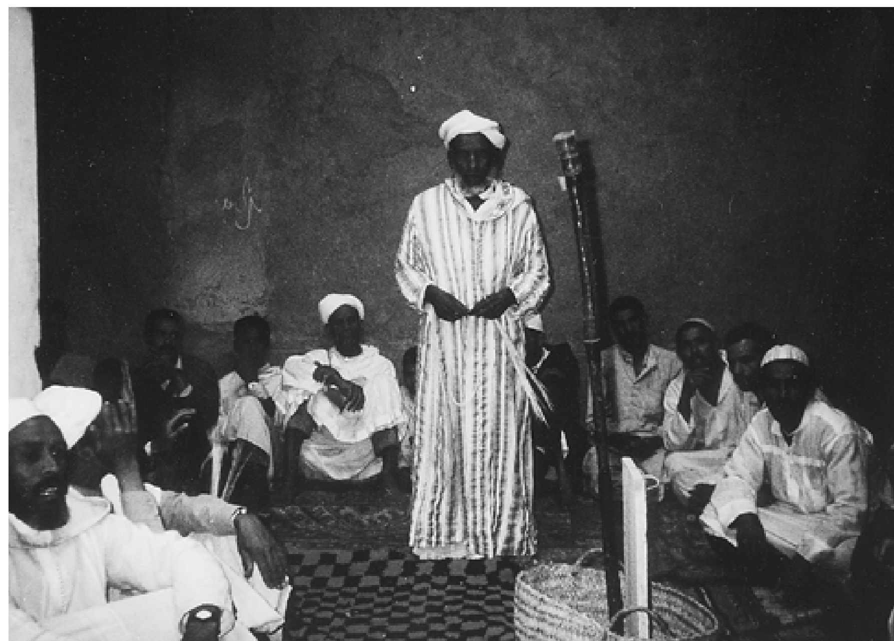
It seems from research conducted in the 1990s that the struggle over the use of honorifics has not yet been toned down. This even appeared humorously in a joke told by a Sharif:

> A Sharif and a Hartani are having a quarrel. At one point, the Hartani announces that practices expressing differences among human beings have to be abolished: 'Everybody is equal, so from this day on everybody has to be addressed with the honorific *mulay'*. So the Hartani goes home, where he tells his relatives about his decision, and they agree. The next morning his young son wakes up and asks his mother: *'Mulay* mama, where is *Mulay* papa?' His mother replies: *'Mulay* son, *Mulay* papa has put the *Mulay* baskets on the *Mulay* donkey, filled them with the *Mulay* manure, and gone to the *Mulay* field'.

Notwithstanding the obvious ridicule over the Hartani's inability to differentiate between the human and the natural world – a fundamental quality of any civilized person – the joke signals the ongoing emancipatory struggle of Haratin against Sharifi authority.

Everyday resistance

From talks with Ibrahim, a young migrant living in a suburb of Casablanca, it appeared that the aversion of Haratin to the use of honorifics indeed stems from its connotation with the persistent system of social distinctions that had kept them in their humble position for so long. Ibrahim had left his natal village down south as a teenager, yet he still saw his former villagers, some of whom were Shurafa. Ibrahim told me of his involvement in a quarrel with a Sharifi migrant from his former village. Once when they met in the public bath, Ibrahim had refused to use the honorific *mulay*. When the Sharif asked for an explanation, Ibrahim's answer was simple: 'Did one say *mulay* to the Prophet Muhammad? There are only human beings, all equal before God. It is impossible to pay respect to people, just because they are born as members of a certain family. Only through his deeds can a person earn respect, but then again, a human does not know the hidden life of his fellow men: Who knows about the secret behaviour of a Sharif? Only God is able to judge human beings.'



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Sharifa ancestry and local sainthood often merge in the Moroccan countryside: a Sharif poses with the relics of the 16th-century village saint.

Ibrahim's aversion to naming practices, which he considered out-dated, was also apparent in his then recent name-change. His parents had named him Fatih, but once settled in Casablanca, he had changed his name into Ibrahim. Fatih was a name that was particularly carried by ᶜAbīd and Haratin. Ibrahim's rebirth, as symbolized in his name-change, can be connected to his interest in religious ideas that came to him through the texts of Abdessalam Yassin, a large collection of cassettes and an illegal videotape of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Young Haratin like Ibrahim are not afraid to contest well-accepted divisions of ethnicity, disputing 'traditional ways' of religious expression and instead putting themselves forward as the ideal model to follow. Arguing against rural practices and rules *(qawnīn)* that keep the social distinctions alive, they suggest that the universal Shariah should be superior to these local 'laws'. They furthermore protest against the persistent practice of taking descent as determinant of one's identity. Showing their national ID, they made clear that their birthplace, instead of their descent, should be the decisive marker of identity.

Ibrahim's adversary in the quarrel was interested in the same issues as Ibrahim. This Sharif acknowledged that it was necessary to reflect upon some aspects of the Islamic faith. But he suggested that people who, like Ibrahim, argue in favour of practices regarding dress, table manners and praying, that followed the Prophet or his companions, should instead follow the example of members of 'the House of the Prophet'.

It has become increasingly difficult in an urban context to be acknowledged as descendant of the Prophet. Sharifi descent still is an important source of pride and public esteem in Morocco and continues to be a valuable asset in acquiring goods and favours. Yet for lesser Shurafa, it is not always easy to obtain acceptance of their descent as valid currency in these bargains. To avoid the inconvenience of one being unaware that he should address the other as a descendant of the Prophet, the Shurafa began paying civil servants to make them print *mulay* in front of the first name on their ID. The Shurafa thus also turned their ID into a symbol of their personal identity. In 1985, however, the government passed a law that put an end to this printing practice.

Fed by an emerging public domain in which discussions on the current state of affairs in and outside Morocco take place, resurgent religious voices like those of Ibrahim and other Haratin signal the seeds of a process of individualization in Moroccan society. It remains to be seen whether this socio-cultural transformation leads to the disappearance of the privileged stature of Shurafa and the persistent ethnic strife in the southern oases. ✦

Notes

1. Berque, Jacques (1982), *Ulémas, fondateurs, insurgés du Maghreb. XVIIe siècle*. Paris: Sindbad, pp. 232-233.
2. Munson, Jr., Henry (1993), *Religion and Power in Morocco*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 87-114.
3. ibid., 11.
4. Agnouche, Abdellatif (1992), 'Les Chorfa face à l'état de droit dans le Maroc contemporain'. In: Jean-Claude Santucci, *Le Maroc actuel. Une modernisation au miroir de la tradition?* Paris: CNRS, pp. 273-283: 276.
5. Moureau, Cpt. (1955), *Les sociétés du Bani: Les Haratins. Parallele entre son evolution et celle des outres races des Bani*. Typescript. Paris: CHEAM no. 2431, pp. 1 and 8.

Remco Ensel is author of Saints and Servants in Southern Morocco *(Leiden: E. J. Brill).*
E-mail: R.Ensel@planet.nl